

SANTA CLARA COUNTY'S REACTION TO THE
ASSASSINATION OF JOHN F. KENNEDY

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The Day That Santa Clara County Stood Still

The warm bright sun shone down over a quarter of a million faces. Young children sat high on the broad shoulders of their fathers in expectation of seeing the youthful president smile their way and extend his hand in a wave of friendship. Sitting beside him, a young beautiful lady radiated in a brilliance of pink waving to envious women and admiring men alike. With the hubble top lowered, the famous and well-liked couple traveled slowly down the street exposed to the Texan sun and humidity. The clock read 12:31 p.m. (CDT), Friday, November 22, 1963. Cautiously, the driver turned the car onto Main Street. Three alarming shots rang out through the thick air of downtown Dallas. The president slumped forward in the frantic embrace of his wife's bloodied arms. Panic spread among the spectators. Secret service men charged the car and sped away. One hour later, the forty-six year old president, shot by Lee Harvey Oswald, was proclaimed dead.

John F. Kennedy's death shocked and shook the nation by its foundations. From sea to sea, in every small town's newspaper, on every city slicker's lips, the news of the assassination spread. The sudden theft of their president's life deeply effected every American, rich or poor, native or immigrant, urban or rural. In Santa Clara County, residents felt the same shock and sadness.

When the news broke, city communication workers report-

ed that the telephone company's switchboard went dead, unable to handle all of the calls. The residents of Santa Clara County were especially disturbed by the president's death. United through tears, residents remembered Kennedy's involvement in the Bay Area. JFK had known this part of California well.

Kennedy spent various times of his life in Santa Clara county, from studying and campaigning. A bright, enthusiastic graduate student from Stanford in 1940, JFK lived on campus at 624 Mayfield Avenue.¹ John Kennedy and his new bride, Jacqueline, had honeymooned on the Monterrey Peninsula in 1953, and they returned three times. In February of 1960, Kennedy visited the Stanford campus in an effort to gain the democratic nomination. Two thousand students filled Stanford Memorial Auditorium to hear his speech, and another two thousand waited outside. On November 2, he campaigned to a crowd of over twenty thousand, who blocked off West San Carlos Street between Market and Almaden in San Jose. One old-timer who could remember every election back to Herbert Hoover, proclaimed Kennedy's reception the biggest in San Jose's history.²

Thus, the news of Kennedy's death caused expected shock and surprise. Today, long time Santa Claran residents still remember what they were doing when they first heard the news. "I was watching 'I Love Lucy'. It was the morning, I remember clearly, and I was expecting my daughter Marla," recalled Virginia Cardinez. "I felt shocked, just completely shocked. It was like we had lost

somebody in the family. Nobody has the right to shoot anybody. I just couldn't believe it." She continued, saying that she hurried to see Mrs. Edna Robinson, her neighbor, to ask if she had heard anything about the president's assassination. The two grown women sat on the couch, listening to the radio overcome by tears of mourning.

In Santa Clara County, residents watched their television sets for hours on end, obsessed, straining their ears in an attempt to catch any previously unnoticed minute detail. Their eyes, like flies on fly paper, stuck to the tube focusing on each update. Motionless and speechless, they absorbed everything with a sense of disbelief and denial. Devastation blanket the quiet community. Under a gray overcast, crowds in business areas fell silent. In the face of this tragedy, tears openly flowed and virtually all activity came to a standstill.

Due to the early dismissal from work and school, families prematurely reunited at home. Companies across the Bay Area closed their doors and sent their employees home. In Mountain View, the Sylvania plant released over two thousand employees at 1:00 p.m. Schools in the county, from elementary to university, also ended early. San Jose State cancelled all classes.³ "I was at school when I heard," remembered Gail Harrell, an educator at Saint Lawrence Academy in Santa Clara. "I was in eighth grade at Cabrillo [Middle School] in U.S. History. We heard the announcement over the P.A. system. We were sent home for three days." Everything instantly shut down.

Robert I. Welch, then mayor of San Jose, ordered all public offices, except for emergency services, closed. At 2:30 p.m. City Hall began to empty, two and one half hours earlier than customary. The employees trudged to their cars in darkened spirits, only to drive home and watch continuing broadcasts of the assassination on all major networks. In the San Jose Police Department, portable radios awoke from their hibernation in the stolen property storage room as officers huddled around to listen to the unbelievable news: "The President is dead."⁴

On the following morning, news stands sold out almost immediately as residents rushed to purchase their issue of the San Jose Mercury News. Headlines pertaining to the assassination packed each page, disclosing information and announcing cancellations. Out of respectful mourning, officials called off the Big Game between Stanford University and the University of California. Virtually all Bay Area recreational activities were cancelled, such as the opening of "Peter Pan" at the San Jose Civic Auditorium.⁵

Flags, in front of City Hall as well as residential homes, lowered to half mast to honor the passing of American's great leader. Firing canons every half hour at Moffett Field broke the eerie silence. Emotional soldiers gathered to officially be notified of their Commander-in-Chief's death. At that very solemn time in Santa Clara County's history, among the lowered flags and blasting canons, residents grieved for the President in various ways.

During that time of confusion and distraut, residents

in the county turned to their faith. As the nation mourned the loss of their leader, church bells tolled and all churches conducted special masses in John F. Kennedy's memory. Being the first Roman Catholic President of the United States had a monumentous impact on the Catholic response to his death. Catholic residents looked to the same God the Father in Heaven for guidance and love that Kennedy did. Reverend John Akers, vice president of the Santa Clara Council of Churches, urged all "citizens regardless of race, color or creed to join in prayer or meditation in thanksgiving for the life and work of President John F. Kennedy. . . "6

Faithfully and diligently, the nation prayed not only for JFK, but also his family. Born as the second of nine children, Kennedy came from a very powerful and prominent family in America. "I feel terribly sorry for his family," claimed Ilse Geisenhoechner, who had newly arrived from Germany, "especially his wife."⁷ Left behind, Jacqueline, his wife of ten years, and his two children received prayers, flowers, and cards containing words of comfort and sympathy.

John F. Kennedy's assassination had a drastic, deeply personal effect on many residents, shattering their hopes and dreams for the future. One student, Charles Talbot, a San Jose football player said,

This is barbaric. I'm a Negro and from our point of view, I think we now face a harder next ten years than the last ten. We won't get another President like John Kennedy again for fifteen, or maybe fifty years. This

is history repeating itself. The two greatest Presidents we've had for the Negroes were Lincoln and Kennedy. Both were assassinated. Everytime there's one who'll help us, he's cut down. 8

Kennedy's assassination came at a critical time in civil-rights legislation. As racial tensions increased, people rioted in the South, especially in the major cities of Alabama and Mississippi. Many civil-rights advocates viewed the President's death as a paramount obstacle for their cause.

Still, for others, John F. Kennedy's death effected, even altered, their future. "There was a lot of sadness," Harrell said glancing downward at her cluttered desk. Smiling she continued, "I really liked what JFK's policy was. I wanted to get involved in politics, but I couldn't because now he was dead. I later swore in college to get involved and I did. In college I worked for Robert F. Kennedy." She hesitated briefly, "I was so disallusioned with politics because of the two Kennedy assassinations, I didn't even vote since Robert until four years ago." Harrell also expressed her frustration with "lunatics" who repeatedly, and so easily, ruin the things most wonderful and needed for this country.

Many residents expressed their anger and frustration as a result of their shattered dreams. "I think this is the darkest day in America's history," commented the San Jose mayor, Robert Welch, saddened and angered by the day's events.⁹ As the world cried, some residents spoke out in anger at the tragedy. "Who could be behind this? I'm all mixed up," Paul Shaw, a postman, growled. "Such a dirty, dirty thing. Whoever did this. . ." he exclaimed waiving

his fist.¹⁰ Ron Modeste, who at the time taught the science class in room 707 at James Lick High School, commented, "I react to those things in anger." Most residents found that their anger stemmed from confusion and frustration.

From the anger, the shattered dreams, and the confusion, Santa Clara County asked, "What's next?" Most residents predicted that war loomed on tomorrow's horizon. "This is horrible," claimed a San Jose housewife, "and I'm sure that it will come to a conflict between nations. Some foreign country is responsible for this. I know we will go to war."¹¹ For their dead President, Americans prepared to fight. Modeste talked about the "traumatic" and "scary" experience. "I thought there was a conspiracy with Fidel Castro, I was concerned with nuclear war. Because we all knew about Oswald's background, we thought nuclear war was eminent." But, when the anger wore off Santa Clara County residents felt only sadness after their tremendous loss of the young President.

With shock and sadness, however, most people reacted towards Kennedy's death. Cardinez explained,

I just can't describe the sadness and emptiness that I felt, we all felt, when we heard about Kennedy. He was a great man. Honestly, I didn't believe that he was dead, it felt more like a cruel April Fool's joke more than anything else. But once it hits you, then you know. . . those were truly sad times.

These people faced the tragedy, the sadness and insecurity head on.

Adults today, full grown and leading active lives, who at the time attended kindergarden and first grade still vividly remember. They still can recall the "grown-ups"

who continually cried and found it unmanagable to find the perfect words to explain to little Tommy that a wonderful man had died. All the County residents felt the absence of John Fitzgerald Kennedy, the man who stood "eyeball to eyeball" with democracy's opposition. The leader of a new generation had, in the blink of an eye, passed on.

Three hundred thousand pairs of downcast eyes lined Pennsylvania Avenue, on Monday the twenty-fifth, witnessing their President laid to rest. Americans reflected on the great achievements of the thirty-fifth president: brave service to the United States Navy for which he received the U.S. Navy and Marine Corps Medal, three terms as a Massachusetts Senator, winner of the Pulitzer Prize for Profiles In Courage (a series of biographical sketches of political figures), his inaugural call for "grand and global alliance" against war, poverty, and disease, his successful dismantling of Soviet long-range missiles in the Cuban Missile Crisis, unprecedented work in civil-rights legislation, his popular receptions and success on foreign trips, and the nuclear-test-ban treaty. All of Santa Clara County watched the mournful parade behind the flag draped casket. Small children held the hands of their mothers, who did not attempt to fight the tears that heavily dropped from their eyes. Even their fathers, strong, proud men with souls unwilling to ever submit to sorrow's constrictive grasp hid their faces to conceal their watery eyes. "The funeral was very sad," Modeste remembered, "very emotional. It equated with my

father's, who was a fireman, death." Resident's watched as a small boy left the protective grasp of his blackened mother to raise his small hand to his forehead, saluting his father one last time. "It still bothers me," Harrell explained, "to see pictures of the horse on Pennsylvania Avenue, and the pictures of his little son saluting his casket." For these Santa Clara residents, the pain they felt was real, and still is.

As the funeral ended and life slowly, to a crawl, returned to normal, Santa Clara County residents still could not forget. Amidst the crowded business areas filled with the distinguished businessmen, the school yard once again brimming with games and laughter, and the return of a quiet community to its customary lifestyle, lay a hidden, but unforgotten bond. Forever remembering Friday, November 22, flung all these people regardless of race or religion, into the bond of tears. The most popular and most loved President, shot on a two-day political campaign to Texas, never would be forgotten. After his death and still today, his call for democracy, justice, liberty, and even love, remain not in many pages of old, dusty U.S. history books, but rather in the hearts of all Americans. "His words weren't spoken or received, like other politicians or people even," Cardinez proclaimed, "the man had style and there was something indescribable about him."

In conclusion, John F. Kennedy's death had a profound effect on the fabric of life in Santa Clara County. Virginia Cardinez, Gail Harrell, Ron Modeste, and many like them, remembered that day, that moment, for the rest of their lives. Santa Clara residents, who reacted with faith, sympathy, anger,

and mostly sadness, never forgot that tragic day--where they were, what they were doing and who they were with. For the first time, many people began to question the government as rumors flew fast and furious about Washington's alleged involvement in the Kennedy's assassination. On the eve of the thirtieth anniversary of John F. Kennedy's death, Santa Clara County recalls an uncertain and traumatic time in American history. A time when innocent years no longer existed. When murders and conspiracy coincided with every day life, when war and hate formed a way of life. Forced to look back, residents remember that time, those tears, and the man. Never has the absence of an American President been so heavily and deeply felt.

Endnotes

¹Harry Farrell "Not A Stranger In Our Midst," San Jose Mercury News (San Jose: November 23, 1963), 1.

²Ibid. 1.

³"Your Reaction To Assassination," SJMN (San Jose: November 23, 1963), 30.

⁴"Public Officials Voice Grief, Anger at Killing," SJMN (San Jose: November 23, 1963), 16.

⁵"Big Game, Other Fetes Called Off," SJMN (San Jose: November 23, 1963), 1.

⁶"In San Jose Area--Prayers of Morning," SJMN (San Jose: November 23, 1963), 16.

⁷"Your Reaction to Assassination," SJMN (San Jose: November 23, 1963), 30.

⁸Ibid.

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹Ibid.

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